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FRANCIS PAUL PRUCHA

The Great Father

*The United States Government
and the American Indians*

PATRICK HENRY I

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Indian Removal

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erial 570, p. 939; report of
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PART THREE

American Expansion and the Reservation System

The removal of the Indians from east of the Mississippi and their settlement beyond Arkansas and Missouri was accomplished by mid-century. The Five Civilized Tribes maintained their national identity in the Indian Territory and at varying rates overcame the trauma of their uprooting and emigration. The smaller tribes along the Missouri border were encouraged by government officials and Christian missionaries to strive for the good life, cultivating farms, learning mechanical arts, and educating their children in white schools. The Indians and the whites were generally at peace.

Just when the education and civilization of the border tribes seemed to be bearing such good fruit, however, dramatic events in the 1840s overturned the premises upon which American Indian policy had been based. The formal removal program had followed the earlier policy, more or less unplanned, of simply moving the Indians west out of the way of advancing white settlement. The definite line separating the Indian country from white lands, which had been defined in the intercourse law of 1796, had been gradually pushed westward, as the Indian tribes ceded land in exchange for annuities and for newly designated and newly guaranteed lands to the west. Some thought that the removals of the 1830s had culminated this process, and that in the "Western Territory" beyond Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa the removed Indians would be finally secure behind a permanent line running from the Red River north and northeast to Lake Superior. Then, suddenly,

before the end of the 1840s the concept of such a line was shattered, and it was not long before the barrier itself was physically destroyed. The expansion of the United States that in three short years added Texas (1845), the Oregon country (1846), and California and the rest of the Mexican Cession (1848), radically changed the relationship between the United States and the Indians.

The government now came face to face with new groups of Indians. There were the nomadic buffalo Indians of the northern and southern plains—Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahos, Crows, Kiowas, Comanches, and Pawnees—warlike and untamed and uninterested in transforming themselves into English-speaking farmers. There were Indians like the Utes, Shoshonis, and Paiutes, subsisting at minimal levels in the mountains and in the wastelands of the Great Basin. There were the oasis Indians of the Southwest with their age-old patterns of life in the pueblos, warlike Apaches and Navajos raiding their peaceful Indian neighbors and the Mexican settlements, and numerous bands of California Indians, some affected by the Spanish mission experience but others living still undisturbed in the mountains. To the north were the Indians of the Pacific Northwest, fishing along the coast and hunting in the intermountain basins. These tribes were not totally unknown, of course, for early explorers had encountered and observed them; traders had met them on the Pacific coast, in the Rocky Mountains, and along the Santa Fe Trail, and some military reconnaissance expeditions had come upon Indian warriors.¹

In Texas the white population that had created the Republic of Texas in 1836 had already challenged Indian occupation of the region. With the acquisition of the Oregon country and the Mexican Cession, American population in those areas swelled greatly, and the aboriginal inhabitants were increasingly pressed upon by aggressive pioneers who had scant concern for Indian rights of person or property. And to get to the riches of the Pacific coastal regions, emigrants cut across the hunting grounds of the plains Indians. The Indian country was invaded, crossed and crisscrossed, and it was no longer possible to solve the question of the Indians' destiny by the convenient scheme of repeated removal. The commissioner of Indian affairs in 1856 looked into the future with considerable perception. He saw railroads moving into the great plains as far as good lands extended and at the same time other railroads moving east from the Pacific coast settlements, followed in both cases by an active white population that would open farms and build cities.

When that time arrives, and it is at our very doors, ten years, if our country is favored with peace and prosperity, will witness the most of

1. These military encounters are described in Francis Paul Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783-1846* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969); see especially chaps. 12 and 18.

it; where will be the habitation and the future of the wasting Indian tribes of the plains, and Territories?

As sure as these great physical changes, these poor denizens of the forest be must be trampled under the foot of rap our great nation shall generously de sion shall at once be made, and appro suitable tracts or reservations of lan nent homes for, and provide the mea

So reservations—in most cases small original holdings of the tribes or bands extinction of the Indians.³ The reservat temporary expedient, for whites dealing 1850s all accepted the idea that the nati would become the abode of enterprising. They had no notion of a pluralistic socie by European immigrants and their desc dians adhering to their own customs. T conflicts between the two cultures and power to do so, the utter destruction of that segregation on reservations and app considered so essential for Texas, Utah, I cific Northwest and that revision of th called for to make them more applicable protection and preservation there was th induce the Indians all to become cultiva man's language, customs, and religion, a zens of the commonwealth, a goal that practicable if only the proper means were mechanical arts, English education, Ch (land allotted in severalty) were the elem was to be the future of the Indians:

The policy makers were firm in their itarian concern and benevolence for their civilization programs among the Five Civ as marked with signs of ultimate success

2. CIA Report, 1856, serial 875, p. 574.

3. Robert A. Trennert, Jr., *Alternative to Expansion: The Beginnings of the Reservation System, 1846-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), covers only a half-dozen years and the title of the book can be applied much more broadly.

with whom the government now came into contact, following a precedent already well established in the East, were not the result of negotiations between two sovereign and independent powers. They were instead a convenient and accepted vehicle for accomplishing what United States officials wanted to do under circumstances that were frequently difficult. By treaty the government could provide Indian segregation on small reservations, throwing open the rest of the territory to white settlement and exploitation. On the reservations the restrictions and protection of the intercourse laws could be applied to restrain if not prevent deleterious contacts between the two races and to protect the remaining rights of the Indians. By treaty, too, the United States sought to provide the means for transforming the life of the Indians, for the negotiations were used to gain the acquiescence, at least nominal, of the Indians to an agricultural existence and "moral improvement and education."

The system was applied with indifferent success. In many cases the treaty procedure came too late, after the destruction of the Indians was already far advanced, and the federal government was inexcusably slow in looking after Indian affairs in the remote regions of the Far West. The single pattern was applied with little appreciation of the varying Indian cultures it was supposed to replace, and on occasion the treaties signed in the field were not ratified by the Senate, leaving the status of the Indians and their lands in a sort of limbo. Often, application of the treaty provisions was possible only after resisting Indians had been overwhelmed and crushed by military force.

The men in the Indian service whose lot it was to seek solutions for the new Indian problems facing the nation after the territorial acquisitions of the 1840s took faltering steps, and Congress was no more sure-footed. But out of it all developed a reservation system that became a staple of United States Indian policy for the future.

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